

BALTIMORE'S MURDER HOUSE



Track down where Butler executed the Civil War's first POWs

One block from Baltimore's Inner Harbor, in the shadow of Federal Hill, a house has been sold.

The present-day property at 337 East Hamburg Street, No. 2, had been on the market for one month and 11 days. The listing reported the building as "conveniently located." The realtor described the estate as both "unique" and "very historic." It's tucked away in south Baltimore, accessible by a narrow alley, and built very differently than the other homes around it.

For one, it's not made of brick; it's a clapboard house with a slanted roof, the siding a sort of muted green. There's a white balcony above and a matching porch below, the sash windows looking out at a dusty parking pad wide enough for one vehicle and long enough for three. It takes three choppy steps to climb up to the front door.

Whether the ghosts of murdered men still haunt the grounds is up for debate, but the property

once served as a makeshift prison for Confederate spies during the opening days of the American Civil War — it's execution grounds an early display of law and order in the Union-occupied city.

In mid-May 1861, a little less than a month after Baltimore's violent Pratt Street Riot resulted in the first bloodshed of the Civil War, the bombastic Massachusetts general Benjamin F. Butler, without orders, opted to uproot his headquarters eight miles south of Baltimore and invade the city during an evening thunderstorm. When citizens woke on the morning of May 14, they found Federal Hill occupied by nearly 500 troops from the 6th Massachusetts—the same regiment that engaged in the April 19 riot.

"Glory Hallelujah, gentlemen," Baltimore merchant and Unionist Enoch Pratt was recorded saying. "We are safe!"

Cannons were trained on the city. Soldiers in blue began parading the streets in support of a newly-estab-

lished marshal law. An order was given to strip the city of any Confederate flags or symbols.

"The exhibition of either of them by evil-disposed persons will be deemed and taken to be evidence of a design to afford aid and comfort to the enemies of the country," Butler wrote in a proclamation to Baltimore citizens on May 14.

While Fort McHenry across the harbor would eventually be turned into the city's main POW site, the early days of the occupation saw Confederate sympathizers brought to the temporary residence of Butler on East Hamburg. There, several Baltimore residents, arrested for their involvement in the riot, had been thrown in the basement-turned-prison to await death by firing squad.

When the time came for their punishment, Butler appeared on the balcony to witness their death in the courtyard below, perhaps the first summary executions of the entire Civil War.